

OBSERVER'S MANUAL

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF THE GREATER DAYTON AREA

**Members of the
Observer Corps
are our eyes and ears
at public meetings.**

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of the Greater Dayton Area
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Introduction

A query by an author, wanting to use information from our Observer's Manual, led us to research its origin. We found no one on the local, national, or state level who had an Observer's Manual.

How did the Dayton League happen to have such a manual? A League member, Lyndon Abbott, gathered all the information and put it in a booklet form in 1976. The Dayton League has been using it since that time.

In 1997, three League members - Connie Cole, Harriette Smith, and Bea Delph - were appointed to update the manual. The Dayton Bar Association funded publication of the updated manual.

By publishing an Observer's Manual, the League of Women Voters continues to promote political responsibility through education and encourages citizens to participate in government. This manual can be used by any group or individual that wants to participate in local government. We hope that by making this manual available more people will learn more about the democratic process in local governance.

Purpose:

Mission: Informed and active participation of citizens in government, increased understanding of major public policy issues, and influencing public policy through education and advocacy is an important part of many organizations. An Observer Corps helps meet that mission. By regularly attending public meetings of local governmental agencies, the Observer Corps' members keep elected officials aware of the organization's interest in local government and helps all the organization's members be better informed citizens through the reports on those meetings.

Objectives:

1. Strengthen communication between the organization and local government agencies, including county commissions, city councils, city commissions, township trustees, boards of education, planning commissions, and boards responsible for a single functional area such as transit, health or parks.
2. Encourage individual members to become better informed regarding the decision-making process in local government.
3. Gather information and identify problems, issues, and trends in the community so as to enable the organization to assess its relationship and importance to current and future organizational programs.
4. Increase the visibility and enhance the image of the organization among elected and appointed officials, community leaders, and those persons responsible for effective delivery of services by public agencies.
5. Encourage better government through the observers presence at meetings.
6. Share information with the organization's members about issues that may affect communities in the area.

Observer Corps Participants:

1. Organization's Board of Directors. Sets priorities and identifies the governmental units and agencies to be observed on a regular basis and receives and acts on information supplied by observers through the Corps Coordinator.
2. Observer Corps Coordinator. The person who serves as the focal point for observer activities and as the channel of communication between the Observer and the Board and various chairpersons. (See job description, Appendix A)
3. Individual Observer. The organization member who regularly attends meetings of an official governmental body or agency, listens to and watches the proceedings, and reports significant information to the Corps coordinator.

Distinction between Observing and Monitoring:

There is a distinct difference between observing and monitoring.

OBSERVING is a passive function.

Therefore, an observer is an individual who regularly attends a governmental meeting, listens and records the events or facts of the meeting, and reports back to the organization, but does not usually comment at the meeting, unless specific direction or permission from the Board of Directors is given.

MONITORING implies action.

"...monitoring is intended as a direct action tool to see that laws and administrative policies are carried out." In League: Guidelines for League Boards.

A monitor is usually authorized by the organization's Board to speak on issues, ask questions, and recommend changes.

General Guidelines for Observers:

Observers should:

- Be good listeners; that is, be able to concentrate on, assimilate, and interpret proceedings and provide objective summaries of controversial issues.

- Become familiar with the organization, officials, functions, and operations of the agency observed including who to contact for additional information and the procedures to use for asking questions.
- Be interested in local governmental processes, policy formulation, and citizen's concerns.
- Be familiar with the organization's programs and positions.
- Identify problems, proposals, and actions that bear upon the organization's program items or that might be significant in future program development.
- Report on actions that might affect other municipalities in the area.
- Exercise discretion and tact at meetings; keep in mind the pressures and demands made on elected officials and the observer's role.
- Be courteous and appreciative of help offered.
- Attend meetings regularly, arrive on time, and stay through the entire meeting.

Observers should NOT:

- Speak at the meetings they attend except to seek clarification or information or present a prepared official statement on behalf of the organization, **unless definitely instructed to do so by the Organization President or a Vice President.**
- Pursue personal interests or participate actively in the meetings, i.e., appear on the agenda, give personal opinions to officials or the press, indicate sympathy with or opposition to an official action or a citizen position.

Suggestions to Observers:

- Abbreviations - in writing reports, you may use the full name of the organization once, then use abbreviations thereafter, e.g., League of Women Voters (LWV).

- No personnel information needs to be reported.
- Be as brief as possible but give enough information to be understandable.
- Reports should be legible.

Procedures:

After the Board sets priorities and individual organization members are recruited and assigned as observers, the President sends a Letter of Introduction to the head of the agency. (See Appendix B, Sample Letter)

The observer learns the names and titles of elected and appointed officials. At the initial meeting, the observer (and any alternate) introduces herself/himself to the presiding officer and to the secretary or clerk. The observer always wears an organization identification badge while acting as an observer.

The observer should be acquainted with the agency's:

1. Legal basis - charter or statute - and obtain a copy, if available
2. Functions and services
3. Financial picture - source of revenue, debt structure
4. Personnel policies - merit system, unions recognized
5. Meeting procedures - time and place of meetings, informal sessions, availability of agenda and minutes, public hearings
6. The observer should also be familiar with the provisions of the Open Meeting Law which applies to all public decision-making bodies with specified exceptions. (See Appendix C for additional comments)

The observer takes notes at the meetings as the basis for reports to the Corps Coordinator. Helpful supplements are newspaper accounts of the meetings, official minutes, and copies of ordinances and resolutions. The observer prepares the report on the Standard Report form and submits it to the Corps Coordinator as instructed on the Form (Appendix D).

Observers are encouraged to take other organization members to the meetings.

What Observers Watch For:

1. Identity of Meeting and Participants

- a) Type of meeting, e.g., regular, special, informal, or public hearing
- b) Members of the Council, Commission, or Board who are present or absent
- c) Principal administrative officers or staff present: City manager, county administrator, school superintendent, fiscal officer, attorney or legal counsel, etc.
- d) Media coverage
- e) Size and composition of audience, e.g., students, lobby groups, observers from other organizations, individual citizens with special interest.

2. Content and Substance

- a) What items were approved or disapproved, postponed, or otherwise considered and disposed of that are of interest to the organization. **THIS IS THE HEART OF THE OBSERVER ACTIVITY!!!** If possible, relate each item to the organization positions and program areas and identify any that deserve immediate attention for possible action.

3. Physical Facilities

- a) Is the building/room adequate in size? well lit? good ventilation? handicapped accessible?
- b) Can the proceedings be heard? Can the officials be seen?
- c) Are the accommodations for the audience comfortable? clean?
- d) Are non-smoking rules followed?

4. Conduct of the Meeting

- a) Are the proceedings formal or informal? Does the presiding officer have the meeting under control? Are officials attentive and alert?
- b) Does there appear to be adequate discussion of issues? Do decisions appear to be “cut-and dried”?
- c) Are visitors treated with respect and courtesy? Do petition-ers have ample opportunity to present their complaints/requests?
- d) Is the atmosphere generally friendly?

Appendix A

Job Description for the Observer Corps Coordinator

1. Serves as the focal point for directing the activities of the organization's observers at meetings of public agencies and the subsequent use of their reports in local, state and national programs.
 2. Recruits (see sample flyer, Appendix E), trains, and advises observers and assists in finding alternates or substitutes.
 3. Reviews guidelines or manual, instructions, standard letters, and standard reporting forms to make sure they are current.
 4. Provides observers with current organization positions and programs.
 5. Recommends to the Board the specific agencies and groups to be visited and observed, and maintains a current list of their names, where and when they meet, and their official personnel.
 6. Reviews and edits observers' report and submits significant items to appropriate officers and chairpersons for their information and action as necessary.
 7. Summarizes observer corps findings and performance for the local organization newsletter.
 8. Develops observer corps as an effective device to strengthen communication between public bodies and the organization and maintains a high level of visibility of the organization.
 9. Performs other related duties as may be assigned by the organization Board or President.
- Insures that Observers are provided the necessary tools, e.g., reporting forms, I.D. badge, etc.

Appendix B

SAMPLE LETTER

Dear

During the next several months, the League of Women Voters would like to send an observer to the meetings of _____.

The observer's role is to listen but not to participate in the proceedings. Through this device, the League is kept informed on community issues and trends and is better able to fulfill its aim of increasing political responsibility and interest in government.

The member designated as observer to your organization is _____, whose address is _____ and telephone number is _____.

Any assistance you can give, such as notices of special meetings and public hearings, advance copies of agendas, minutes of meetings, material for public distribution, changes in time and location, cancellations, etc. will be appreciated.

If you have any questions, please contact _____ who serves as the coordinator of the Observer Corps.

Sincerely,

President
League of Women Voters

Appendix C

1. Ohio's Open Meetings Law, also known as the Sunshine Law, states "all meetings of any public body are declared to be public meetings open to the public at all times".
2. A public meeting must meet three conditions:
 - meetings are prearranged
 - must discuss public business
 - is attended by a majority of the public body's members
3. Consult Section 121.22 of the Ohio Revised Code, effective June 1988, for more detailed information; or contact the League of Women Voters of Ohio for their publication on "Sunshine Law". This informative publication outlines Ohio's open meeting law and is available to the public. Contact the League of Women Voters of Ohio, 17 South High Street, Suite 650, Columbus, Ohio 43215-3413 1-800-598-6446 to place an order. Individuals outside of Ohio should contact their local legislature for information on an "Open Meeting Law" in your state.

Appendix D

Sample Observer Report Form

1. Name of Observer _____
Unit _____ Date _____ Time _____
Place _____
Attendance:
Voting Members Present _____

Voting Members Absent _____
Management Personnel and Advisors Present _____

Media Represented _____
Other Persons or Groups Attending _____
2. Content: Items of Significance to the League
 - a. Decisions Reached;
 - b. Subjects Discussed but Action Postponed;
 - c. Recommendations for League Attention, Action, or Follow-up;
 - d. Citizen Comments;
3. Physical Facilities, including change of meeting place.
4. Conduct. Report when necessary.

Appendix D (continued)

Reporting Instructions

1. Complete and send the form for each meeting attended to the Corps Coordinator by the established deadline.
2. REPORT ANY URGENT MATTER TO THE OFFICE IMMEDIATELY!!!
(Example : An action in direct opposition to the organization positions).
3. It is not necessary to furnish the Observer Corps Coordinator with a copy of the agenda, handouts, or other material collected at the meeting unless it relates to items of importance to the organization.
4. The observer should keep a copy of all reports submitted.

Put additional pertinent comments on the back of the form to supplement the information called for in the report.

Appendix E

Sample

Recruiting Flyer for the LWV Observer Corps

By attending public meetings of various local governmental agencies, the Observer Corps keeps our elected officials aware of the League's interest in local government. By reporting on these meetings in the Newsletter, the Corps helps all League members be informed citizens.

Each observer regularly attends the public meetings of a city council, school board or other elected body which makes decisions affecting our daily lives. An observer is a listener, not a participant, and interprets and summaries the debates and decisions. The observer also identifies problems, proposals and actions that bear upon League program items or that might be significant in future program development and alerts the League's Board. If so instructed by the President or a Vice President, an observer may present a prepared, official statement on behalf of the League before the elected body.

If you would like to know more about the Corps or to become an observer or an alternate, please call the Observer Corps Coordinator at _____.

References:

**In League: Guidelines for League Boards
League of Women Voters of the United States
May 1975**

**League of Women Voters Observer's Manual
October 1976**

**Ohio Revised Code
Section 121.22**